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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hearing of the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations
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Good afternoon Chair Kallos and Members of the Committee on Governmental Operations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the issues of term limits for Community Board members and urban planners for Community Boards.

Int. No. 585-2014

Int. No. 585 would set a 12 year term limit – or six two year terms – for members of New York City’s Community Boards. I am not a fan of term limits and believe that robust elections and appointment processes are the best way to balance the competing interests of having experienced public officials with ensuring new blood in elective or appointive positions. This is especially true on community boards where members are unpaid, yet spend an enormous amount of time dealing with what are often extremely complicated issues.

In Manhattan, some of our longest serving community board members are the best and most knowledgeable. Let’s take the critical area of land use as an example where community boards play a Charter-mandated role in the ULURP process. It takes time for a non-land use professional to develop the expertise needed to function at a high level as a community board leader on zoning and land use issues. In fact, it could be that for an initial term a newer community board member may not serve on the land use or planning committee. When a member gets on a committee such as this, it could take several years to develop significant expertise. At this point, under the conditions proposed by Int. No. 585, the member would be term-limited out. I have real concerns that this would lead to an over-reliance by community boards on their members who work professionally in the land use and development worlds.

Now there are some individual cases of less active appointees who seem to be continually reappointed by virtue of inertia or habit. A robust appointment process can and should deal with that issue and it is up to the Borough Presidents to ensure such a process. Since becoming Manhattan Borough President, I have established an extremely rigorous process in which both current and new applicants are vetted for approximately two months. There is an extensive application process and applications are reviewed and scored by a team in my office as well as panels of outside experts. Then every applicant is brought into the office to participate in a series of exercises which demonstrate knowledge, ability to grasp important issues and most importantly – the ability to work with others. Finally we speak to board chairs and Council Members to get their input on applicants.

We received 729 applications for the 300 Community Board available appointments. Over the last few months we completed a round of appointments with 91 new community board members, five of whom were 16 and 17 year olds. Just as I have championed 16 and 17 year old service on community boards, I try my best to search for and appoint community board members who will bring demographic and geographic diversity to the boards. I believe my office's efforts are a better way of dealing with what may sometimes be the inertia of an appointment process rather than a strict term limits requirement.

Int. No. 732 of 2015

Int. No. 732 would amend the Chapter of the City Charter relating to urban planning professionals. Currently the Borough Presidents are required to maintain a planning office and the planning office is required to provide technical assistance to community boards. Int. No. 732 would require the Borough President to provide in our office “within appropriations therefor, the services of at least one professional planner.... for each community board in the borough.” I fully agree with the sponsors' intention that community boards should be provided with

additional resources. However, I have serious concerns that providing those resources through planners at the borough presidents' offices will not prove an effective way of assisting community boards.

In my office, urban planners are assigned to cover all community boards in the borough. These planners attend all of the land use or planning committee meetings of the community boards to which they are assigned, are in regular touch with the boards they cover, and are always available to assist the boards with land use issues. However, they work for the Borough President and are responsible for furthering the Borough President's land use and development goals. To the extent that this is what the law requires, it is already being done. But I assume that the law is designed to supplement the community board's resources by providing additional planners to assist them with their work. While I agree that additional resources should be provided, these resources should be provided directly to the community boards and should be available to the boards for their most pressing needs. In some Manhattan districts, years can go by before the board sees a ULURP, much less the same type of action on a regular basis in which board members can develop expertise. Some boards would be better served by hiring a housing expert or an additional person to assist with constituent services.

Another consideration is that a requirement to house, pay and manage urban planners from the borough presidents' offices could lead to a host of unintended consequences. Budgetary concerns aside, in the land use context the borough president functions as a bridge between community concerns and the borough's development needs. It may be hard to function in this manner if a borough president employee is supporting a community board position that may be contrary to the borough's priorities.

I urge the Council to support the goals of this legislation but to do so by providing increased direct and unencumbered financial support to the Community Boards.